

Appendix 12

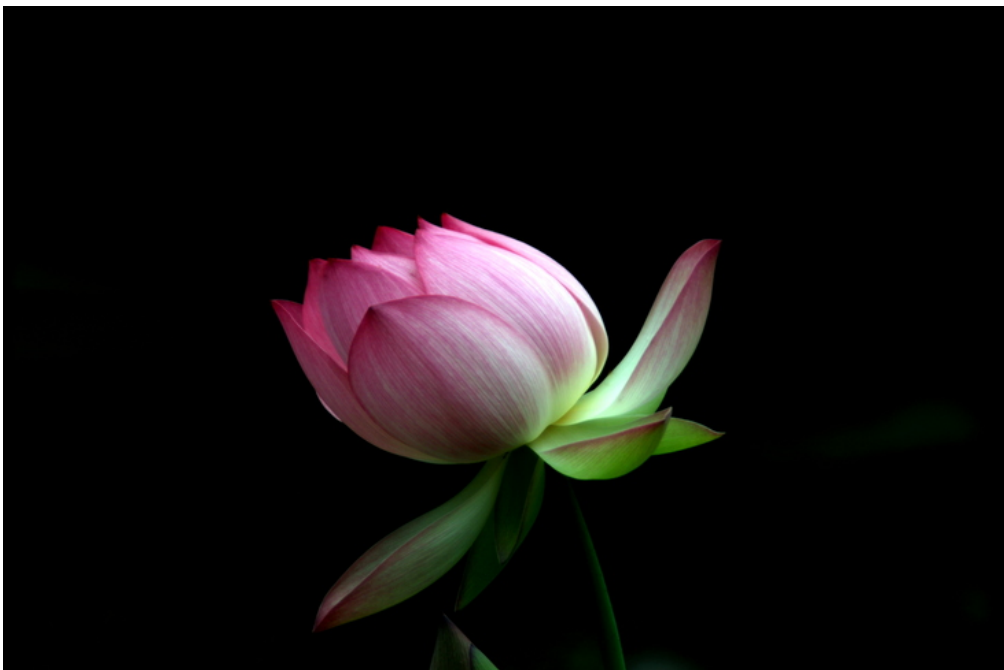
What is Karma and How Does It Work?

By Lion's Roar Staff

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The lotus is a symbol of karma in Buddhism. Photo by Rebecca. The Buddha taught that because of karma, beings are bound to the ever-turning wheel of rebirth. Only when a person stops believing in the existence of a permanent and real self can he or she become free from karma. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Jan Chozen Bays, and Jeffrey Hopkins discuss what that means.

Westerners often have trouble with this doctrine, for although they can easily believe that selfishness or ego-clinging causes suffering, it is harder to accept the existence of an invisible system of moral causality called karma. Likewise, since the dawn of the Christian era few Westerners have

taken seriously the idea of many lifetimes, even though it was present in Pythagoras and some of Plato. And so we have Shakespeare's satire on Pythagoras in *As You Like it*, in which he has Viola sarcastically saying that she has not been entertained so much "since the time that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember."

The word "karma" literally means "action." It is cognate with the most ordinary Sanskrit words for "to make" or "to do." Many religious ceremonies are called "karmas," which in this context simply means "ritual actions." And there is the famous Hindu practice of seeking liberation through selfless work, which is called karmayoga—the yoga of activity.

However, in this discussion we are looking at karma in the context of Buddhist doctrines on the moral consequences of behavior. In that sense karma has a very specific meaning: "volitional action." A volitional action is one done on purpose, although a clear reason may not always be present to the mind. For example, if while walking down the street one trips and falls on a small dog, killing it, that is not considered a karmic act, for there was no volition involved. If, on the other hand, the dog barks at you and in anger you kick it into the traffic, that is a volitional act. Meanwhile, the dog will live or die according to *its* previous karma, and probably much later you will suffer some unfortunate occurrence because of the karmic consequences of *your* aggression.

Buddhist language uses farming metaphors to describe this doctrine. A karmic act plants a "seed" which "ripens" later in a karmic "fruition" when conditions are right. Like seeds, the potential for a later ripening may remain dormant for a very long time. But when moisture and warmth are finally applied to the seed, then it produces shoots, the visible manifestation of the perhaps long-buried karmic potential.

This process works for positive as well as negative acts. For example, charity in Buddhist societies is spurred by the belief that generosity to the poor or the monastic sangha accumulates positive karma and one may be reborn as a king or a long-lived god or a Rockefeller.

Believing in karma is thus in principle a cause for moral behavior, because one knows that negative acts bring negative consequences. In that sense, the doctrine of karma acts rather like notions of divine justice in monotheistic religions. When we break God’s commandments, we may not see His rewards and punishments, but ultimately His will is done and justice prevails. Buddhism has the same “ultimately.” An inveterate evil-doer may seem to be rewarded his or her whole life, but cause and effect is subtle and hidden from the unenlightened eye. Ultimately the evil-doer’s karma will ripen in precise events which are an impersonal, but self-existing punishment for past negativity.

— Robin Kornman

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What is karma, according to the Buddhist teachings?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Perhaps we could begin with the description of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience as given in various sutras in the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Pali, *Majjhima Nikaya*). This gives a very concise statement of the early Buddha’s understanding of karma.

The Buddha’s enlightenment unfolded by way of what are called the Three Higher Knowledges. The first of these is the Buddha’s knowledge of his past lives—recollecting his previous lives going back hundreds of thousands of eons. The second is his knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings, which involves understanding how beings transmigrate according to their karma. Perhaps I could read a passage describing this from the Bhayabherava Sutta:

“When my concentrated mind was purified, bright and so on, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and being reborn, inferior and superior, bare and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate. I understood how beings pass on according to their actions thus:

“These beings who are ill-conducted in body, speech and mind, revilers of noble ones, wrong in their views, giving effect to wrong view in their actions, with the breakup of the body after death, have reappeared in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower worlds, even in hell.

“But these worthy beings who were well conducted in body, speech and mind, not revilers of noble ones, right in their views, giving effect to right view in their actions, on the breakup of the body after death, have been reborn in a good destination, even in the heavenly world.

“Thus, with the divine eye I saw beings passing away and being reborn and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.”

Finally, the third knowledge is described as the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. But preceding that comes the understanding of the chain of dependent origination (Pali, *patichcha-samuppada*), or dependent arising. This involves understanding the dynamics of how karma, in conjunction with the basic defilements of ignorance and craving, brings about rebirth.

Jan Chozen Bays: As a physician, I teach karma from a scientific point of view, because what I love about karma is that it is rational. Karma is like the laws of physics. It's almost mathematically precise, and there is a great relief in that. Because if you understand karma, you really understand who and what you are, and you understand the rest of the universe too, because the laws of karma are universally applicable.

When I teach about rebirth, I ask people to consider what happens to the physical elements of the body after they die. I ask them, if we buried you in the ground with no preservatives and dug you up in a week, would we recognize you? Yes. If we dug you up in a year, would we recognize you? Maybe. If we dug you up in ten years, would we

recognize you? No. So what happened to the elements that made up the body? They all dispersed and became other things.

If you die angry, what happens to that energy of anger?

Appreciating this, people begin to understand that on the physical level there is a endless chain of energy that passes through a series of changes. Then if you apply the same principle to our mental and emotional energy, you can also ask where it goes. That energy is also not destroyed, though the energy that was “you” will transform.

Karma is a wonderfully exact force in our lives. If you die angry, what happens to that energy of anger? Where does it go? When you walk into a room where people have been angry, you can sense it—the energy is palpable. So is that the kind of energy you would like to pass on, to be picked up by other lives? One can also look back at what energies have been passed down to you—perhaps by your family or the people who influenced you—and that helps you understand that energy doesn’t die but rather continues on in some form.

I don’t worry too much about questions like, “Am I going to remember that I was Queen Victoria or her servant?” People get caught up in that sort of approach to karma and rebirth, but it’s almost irrelevant. The continuity of the energy is what’s important. What do you want to pass on—suffering or happiness?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Somebody who is a strict materialist might reply to your argument by saying that of course the mental energy is dependent on the physical basis—the body, the nervous system, the brain—and so when the body dies whatever mental energy has been generated by that person perishes also. In response to that, I would look at two extreme cases: an extreme case of evil, Adolph Hitler, and on the other hand, somebody like Mother Theresa, who engaged in so much self-sacrificing labor for the good of others. If we take a materialistic viewpoint, then when each of them dies, it is the complete end. Maybe for Hitler there are a few moments of remorse or regret, then it’s just blank, it’s all over. When Mother Theresa is about to die, there might be a few moments of rejoicing for her altruistic work, then everything is over.

If one takes the materialistic viewpoint, then, it means that the universe has no underlying principle of moral justice. However, if we are going to recognize some kind of moral justice in the universe, there would have to be some continuity beyond death. That could take the form of an eternal afterlife in one realm or another—eternity in hell, eternity in heaven—but that seems difficult to reconcile with the position that any kind of volitional action generates only a finite mental force. What seems more convincing is that our various activities in this life will produce rebirth in a realm where they will expend their force over a finite period of time, to be followed by a new existence somewhere else.

Jeffrey Hopkins: The appeal of karma to me is psychological, based on my own experience of attitudes and actions from earlier parts of my life that I have seen play out later. I meet a lot of people who have an experiential sense of karma. We even see it on television and in the movies. On the last episode of *Seinfeld*, the characters paid for their karma. They all ended up in jail for very specific things they had done that they were reflecting on. The movie *Flatliners* was very successful, and it was all about karma. Things people had done earlier in a lifetime were coming back to haunt them.

As each moment of consciousness perishes, it passes its entire accumulated storage of impressions, experiences, potentially memories, and karmic deposits on to the succeeding moment of consciousness.

At another level, understanding emptiness enhances one's understanding of karma. Proper understanding of emptiness should not yield the view that things do not exist, that actions and so forth do not exist. A proper understanding of emptiness requires a proper understanding of dependent arising. Once there is dependent arising, there is cause and effect. Once there is cause and effect, our actions have effect. And since the mind is something that is not physical, it can serve as a repository of the potencies established by actions and can carry them from lifetime to lifetime. If a person's seeming understanding of emptiness undercuts the entire existence of phenomena, the traditions that I know hold this to be wrong. If one thoroughly understands actions and their effects, the very fact that an action can create an effect means that it does not exist in and of itself. So, understanding dependent arising leads to understanding emptiness. In turn,

understanding emptiness leads to greater understanding of the cause and effect of actions.

What is the medium by which karma is carried from moment to moment, and lifetime to lifetime? What is it that creates this continuity?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: It is a stream of consciousness, a continuum of moments of consciousness. As each moment of consciousness perishes, it passes its entire accumulated storage of impressions, experiences, potentially memories, and karmic deposits on to the succeeding moment of consciousness.

Within a single lifetime, that continuum of consciousness rests on the basis of a physical body. When death takes place, the physical body can no longer serve as the basis for the continuity of consciousness. But as long as latent tendencies of ignorance and craving still exist within that stream of consciousness, it will re-arise after death using some new physical organism as its basis. (There are formless realms where the continuity of consciousness can occur without a physical basis, but we need not discuss those here.)

The underlying latent defilements—in particular the craving for new existence (Pali, *bhava-tanha*) and behind that, ignorance (Pali, *avijja*)—maintain the continuity of consciousness from life to life. When death takes place, ignorance and craving renew the process of conditioned existence. The stream of consciousness preserves and transmits all the wholesome and unwholesome karmas generated by that being, not only in the immediately terminating lifetime but from beginningless time. All the karmas whose force has yet to be expended will be transmitted.

Jan Chozen Bays: What carries karma forward is the energy of the three poisons: clinging, aversion and ignoring. As a pediatrician, I have examined hundreds of newborn babies, and each one of them has these characteristics. Some are born angry and upset at the world. Others are born wanting sense experiences and are upset if they don't get them. Still others just like to go unconscious, and if distressed, they go to sleep. These same energies bond human existence together moment by moment. But if we can

experience our life as individual moments, as occurrences within a framework of emptiness, there is no difficulty and in that moment karma is not transmitted.

Someone said that when you sit very deeply, at least you are doing no harm. One of our early precepts in Zen is, "First cease from evil." When you sit in absolute stillness, you stop transmitting the karmic streams that are moving through you all the time. If my parents abused me and therefore I carry aggressive energy that wants to strike out at others, I can nevertheless create a gap through my practice, so that when the impulse to become angry arises, I don't carry it out in speech and action. I have expiated not only my own karma but also my parents' karma. That is the most wonderful aspect of karma: it spreads out from us in all directions throughout space and time. We are made of emptiness and karma.

Jeffrey Hopkins: In the teachings, there are descriptions of a mind basis of all, the *alaya-vijnana*, that serves as a medium for karma. There are also descriptions of a subtle mental consciousness that serves as the medium for the infusion of karma. And then interestingly, there is the description of the person as the medium of karma, which is rather fascinating.

The emptiness of persons doesn't mean that persons don't exist. Persons do exist. We exist as dependent arising. When we say things like, "I finally owned up to what I did," there is the sense of "I did it." I often pause to catch myself seeing the locus of owning the action as "I." That's very provocative. Not much is said about it, but it is widely known that this is another way of talking about the medium of karma.

Then there is another view, which is that the mere ending of the action is in itself a sufficient medium. It is an impermanent phenomenon that goes on and on until it brings about the result of that action. This is perhaps the most mysterious of them all.

Finally, in highest yoga tantra, there is the extremely subtle mind of clear light which serves as the basis and carries the previous positions from lifetime to lifetime.

I should add that the stopping of ignorance and attachment that has been discussed here doesn't necessarily bring about the end of embodiment. But it would put one in a state where one would be called to unleash the energies of all of those karmas and turn

them into buddhahood.

Should one try to convince a Westerner just coming to Buddhism to accept the principles of karma and rebirth fully?

Bhikkhu Bodhi: I wouldn't begin by trying to impose the full weight of classical Buddhist doctrine on a Westerner who has newly come to Buddhism. Yet I wouldn't disguise or camouflage the teachings. I would tell someone exactly what the Buddha teaches.

I would say, though, that if one is coming to Buddhism out of the blue, one should begin by examining those principles of the Buddha's teaching that can be verified within one's life here and now. One can see, for example, that when one observes ethical conduct, the quality of one's life improves. One can see that when systematic development in meditation diminishes greed, anger and ignorance, one becomes more mindful, more aware, and gains greater insight into experience. One will see, as a result, that one experiences greater happiness, peace and contentment. On that basis, I would say that one can recognize where these teachings are coming from: they are coming from the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Many people call themselves Buddhists having only a vague notion of what Buddhism is about. That's okay. You could be a beginning geologist and not understand all of geology, but you still call yourself a geologist because you are studying it.

Once one gains a working confidence in the Buddha—based on what one can validate and confirm in one's own experience—then one should be willing to place trust in those teachings of the Buddha which lie beyond the scope of one's immediate experience. Not out of blind submission to the authority of the Buddha, but because one has gained experiential validation of some aspects of his teachings. Therefore, if one wants to follow

that teaching to its full extent, one should be ready to accept on trust those teachings that lie beyond one's present capacity for confirmation.

Jeffrey Hopkins: Certainly, skepticism is still required, at least in the type of scriptures I am used to. Buddha taught, for example, that the earth is flat. This has been contradicted by direct perception. Accepting all of it, then, strikes me as difficult and opposes a basic Buddhist attitude of questioning and skepticism. I think faith and skepticism can fit together in the same person.

Is it more important to believe in karma or is it more important to believe that the central thing I should do is be a kind person? One could believe in karma and not work too hard at being kind. That would mean your belief in karma didn't have much effect on you.

Jan Chozen Bays: A wonderful aspect of Buddhist teaching is that each person is asked to be curious, to investigate and confirm from their own experience. I think it helps to ask people to consider examples from their own lives, as Bhikkhu Bodhi was saying. People can understand examples from their own lives and begin to generalize to other people's lives. People see, for example, that if no one interrupts the cycle of child abuse, it can be perpetuated generation after generation. Only if someone can come in and stop this force that moves forward and causes suffering can you free future generations.

It seems to me that karma works like a pendulum, or like one of those little gadgets with the line of balls hanging from strings. You pull one ball out and let it go and it hits the line of four balls and another ball at the other end goes out. There is conservation of energy. Consider a family in which the father is a career military officer. One child in that family may rebel against that as a way to find happiness and end suffering. The child sees the defects, fairly clearly as children often do, and becomes a hippie pacifist. This child grows up and then one of their children, seeing the weaknesses of the pacifist and the rejection of the material world, rebels and becomes a Wall Street broker. Then the child of the Wall Street broker becomes a Buddhist monk. You get this swing back and forth of action and reaction, until someone says, "I can see that this is going to continue forever, and it is not breaking the cycle of suffering, so I am going to do something about it." With this kind of very practical explanation, using examples from their own lives, people can begin to see how karma works.

Many Westerners have trouble accepting the doctrine of karma. Others say it is not essential. How central is the doctrine of karma to Buddhism? Is it possible to call oneself a Buddhist without believing in karma?

Jeffrey Hopkins: The acceptance of the importance of karma in a former and future lifetime is crucial. Personally, it is quite valuable for my own practice. However, someone might be inspired by stories about the Buddha—or about bodhisattvas or arhats who act with compassion—and seek to help others as a result. If they then call themselves Buddhists, despite not believing in rebirth and that karma carries over from one lifetime to another, I have no problem at all.

Jan Chozen Bays: It confuses me to call it the “doctrine of karma,” because to me that’s like saying the “doctrine of gravity.” It is a fact, not a doctrine. It is a fact that underlies how the universe works. Once you understand that fact and also experience it, it is such a relief. It brings happiness because it relieves your anxiety about how things work.

How central is the “doctrine of karma”? Absolutely central, because it is central to our existence. You may call yourself a Buddhist without accepting karma as a fact, just as you may call yourself anything you want to. In fact, many people call themselves Buddhists having only a vague notion of what Buddhism is about. That’s okay. You could be a beginning geologist and not understand all of geology, but you still call yourself a geologist because you are studying it.

A Buddhist studies their buddhanature, their essential nature, or the essential truth of how the universe works. We could think of ourselves as nursery school Buddhists, who are just beginning to understand and experience the truth of Buddhism. If people want to call themselves Buddhists and say they don’t understand or experience karma, that’s okay. Hopefully, they will simply continue to study it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi: If one sincerely and deeply goes for refuge to the Triple Gem, then one has to investigate what is implied by that act of taking refuge. When I go for refuge in the Buddha, I place confidence in the Buddha as the fully enlightened one. When I investigate his own account of his enlightenment, I find that it includes recollection of previous lives and realization of karmic laws that govern the process of rebirth.

When I take refuge in the dharma and study the doctrine deeply, I see that karma and rebirth are pillars of the teaching. The ideas of karma and rebirth are included in many of the formulations of right view. So if I really accept the dharma, then I should consent to the ideas of karma and rebirth. When I enter the path, I can begin to observe Buddhist ethics, and I could engage in intensive meditation without believing in karma and rebirth. But if my path is really to become part of the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to final liberation, I will find that right view is defined in some contexts as the acceptance of the principles of karma and rebirth.

From the Theravadin point of view, the goal of one's path is nirvana, the extinction of karma and the release from the round of rebirth. When one takes refuge in the sangha, one understands that the true sangha is the aryan sangha, the community of noble ones. These noble ones are defined precisely by the extent to which they have cut off the root of rebirth.

I would say, then, that the act of taking refuge itself, when it is done sincerely, with clear understanding, will involve consenting to the ideas of karma and rebirth. Some proponents of what I call modernistic Buddhism, or what Stephen Batchelor calls "agnostic Buddhism," say it is sufficient to base one's life and practice on the Four Noble Truths, without bringing in ancient Indian metaphysics or the cultural baggage of Asian superstitions. However, if we examine the implications of the Four Noble Truths deeply enough, we will find they are quite inseparable from the ideas of karma and rebirth.

For example, the First Noble Truth of *dukkha* doesn't mean simply experiencing sorrow, anguish, greed, worry and anxiety. At the deepest level, it means the continuity of these five clinging aggregates. Without some notion of karmas and rebirth, the very idea of five clinging aggregates at the basis of one's being becomes incomprehensible. Then from the point of view of the Second Noble Truth, how is craving the origin of suffering? We could look at it psychologically and say that when there is craving, one makes oneself vulnerable to the clinging aggregates. But when one studies the sutras deeply, one finds that craving is the force that brings the renewal of the five aggregates from one life to the next. From this premise, the Third and Fourth Noble Truths follow logically.

The act of taking refuge, then, the act of practicing in accordance with the Four Noble Truths, implies accepting the principles of karma and rebirth.

Jeffrey Hopkins: I think Bhikkhu Bodhi makes many good points. Nevertheless, I think that someone can take refuge in the Three Jewels sincerely and not understand many of the points that I too consider very important. There are simply many levels, and I want to try hard not to be exclusivist. I'm not saying that Bhikkhu Bodhi is exclusivist, because he didn't indicate that. He has made a very good case about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the Three Jewels.

It is a huge mistake to take the doctrine of karma as being simply deterministic.

Nevertheless, I think one can call oneself a Buddhist because one is inspired by various and sundry aspects of the Buddhist teachings. At some point, I think that one would nevertheless come to see the cause and effect of actions and would eventually see that there were former and future lifetimes.

We have to consider that people are brought up to think many things. A young person in China and Tibet today is propagandized to think that Tibet is just one of the provinces of China. To a great many people, it becomes unthinkable that it is anything else. Just so, people who go through the educational system in America are propagandized to think that the mind is the brain, a physical phenomenon, or at best an epi-phenomenon of the brain.

We are also faced with the very difficult psychological fact that few of us remember our former lifetimes. That is a great stumbling block to thinking that we are going to have to undergo the future effects of what we are doing now. We just plain don't remember past lives, so we don't have a sense of continuity from former lifetimes. But we also don't have a sense of continuity of many of our dreams from the night before. You could be lying with somebody in bed and the next morning the other person will say, "You really went through it last night," and you say, "What? I don't remember anything."

If karma implies that people's situations are the result of their own actions in the past, do we still work to alleviate what we see as injustice?

Jeffrey Hopkins: It is a huge mistake to take the doctrine of karma as being simply deterministic. The mere fact that suffering that I undergo or others undergo is due to former karma doesn't mean that one wouldn't work hard to alleviate it now and in the future. Karma has the dual meaning of past actions that shape the present, and present intentions and actions that will shape the future. Intention is the heart of karma, the very heart. What does intention mean? It means will.

I wouldn't call this justice. In a way, it is indeed just, in the sense that we are getting our just desserts. But justice also has the sense that it is right. Quite simply, I did something and I'm suffering from those earlier actions in this lifetime or former lifetimes. The question to ask is, what can I do to turn this all around for myself and for others? It is an absolute call to work very hard for social betterment and for the betterment of oneself.

One of the great pitfalls for Buddhists is to think there is nothing we can do about the condition we find ourselves in—it is simply karma. That is a pitfall. But pitfalls are somehow built into the system. The system opens up this pit for us to fall into. Maybe another pitfall is saying, "Well, karma says I can direct my future." The pitfall there is to think, "Well, let me change for a couple of days, and I'll be able to change my entire future."

Bhikkhu Bodhi: Earlier when I used the phrase "moral justice in the universe," I was using "justice" in a somewhat metaphorical sense. I didn't intend to imply that a person's past karma can justify having them live in poverty under very unbearable circumstances in this present life. The principle of karma implies obligation to alleviate the sufferings of others and try to establish a just and peaceful social order.

Quite independently of the doctrines of karma and rebirth, Buddhism can lay a kind of blueprint for establishing social and political justice, derived from the concept of dharma. Dharma in this case refers not to the Buddha's formulated teaching but rather to the universal law of righteousness. A number of the sutras speak about the ideal king, the Cakkavatti raja, the universal monarch who rules on the basis of dharma. In one of them from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, it says:

"The Universal Monarch, the just and righteous King, relying on the dharma, the law of righteousness, honoring it, regarding it highly and respecting it, with the dharma as his

standard, banner and sovereign, provides lawful protection, shelter and safety for his own dependents, for the warrior nobles, for his army, for the Brahmans and householders, for the citizens of town and countryside, for ascetics and Brahmans, and for the beasts and birds. He is also obliged to keep the country free of crime and to give wealth to the poor.”

These kinds of principles, which were ascribed in earlier times to the ideal Buddhist monarch, can now be transferred to present-day governments, and we can regard it as their obligation to fulfill these basic principles that flow from the dharma—justice, establishing social harmony, alleviating poverty, providing protection of the people.

Jan Chozen Bays: Buddhism is the ultimate action for social justice. To teach people the way of liberation is the most fundamental way to help relieve suffering in the world. If that is not social justice, I don't know what is. According to the laws of karma, everyone is created equal in terms of their ability eventually to become free. If we are made of emptiness and cause and effect, we are all the same. Because we know a path out of suffering, our way of acting in the world as Buddhists and applying social justice is to teach others the path, so that they themselves can use these tools and become free and happy.

You can, of course, relieve suffering in a simple way by giving someone a meal, for example, if that is within your means. Not to do that would be unwholesome karma, for you and for them. I work in the field of child abuse, even though I know that some of the things I do are going to have unintended effects because they get mixed up in the sea of bureaucracy. Nevertheless, I try to do the best I can with the child or the family in front of me. The most nourishing food, however, is the food of the dharma. That's what everybody wants.

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